

FIONA SAMPSON



AT KÄSMU AND OTHER POEMS



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The Betrayal

Something is broken –
Milk not rising from the floor
to resume the shape of a jug,
the stone splashed
with creamy stars

Something has broken through
what was clear –
It makes a dark star in glass –
the way distance
draws on the unseen

Broken and new
as a staggered chord,
the next moment
comes racing back
along your glance



Zeus to Juno

He –

You saw the way her body looked at me
all address

calling me down

She was so
well-turned,
curve and volume
her body presented itself

Clay –

I could mould it

She –

You were taboo
not totem –
covered her
though your wing gave no shelter

your pale plumage
becoming shadow
your beak caught
in the net of her hair

He –

When I entered her
her death became my life
in her death swoon
she fell away from me

the more she fell
the deeper I pursued her
the deeper I went
the more lost she became
her body
became a forest of echoes
hills and valleys
echoing each other, a language
I didn't know

She –

The discarded body



lies in long grass,
flies and wasps
fumble there

On a summer day
the lost girl hums –
Kelly, Sarah, Jo, changed
into parable

prodigal hair
flung out
 body agape
like a question

The scavenging crow
knows she's beautiful,
outgrowing her name
in the noon heat



First Theory of Movement

I suspect movement mostly
has to do with light.
Flex a bare leg – like this.
Panels of pallor and shadow
rush to re-form,
slipping down the skin
like blinds released against a White Night.

In the window
I glimpse my page turning
and mistake it for a gull.
Out over the bay
the birds' display – wild fowl,
gulls, swallows
skimming the water –

is so clearly delight
it makes me put down my book
to catch the terns
skywriting above the jetty.
They call each other with tender
nudges left over
from long journeys.

Unimaginable what they've seen
and how light must tug,
a mineral strain
flowing through their eyes
into bloodstreams
that race differently, somehow –
the way spring makes us restless.

Wishes and complaints
tumble together on a bed.
And it is spring,
this evening at the shore
where lilac's in green bud
and behind sea-facing windows
a little skin is bared –



Communion

If I'm you, or you me –
interpenetrating God –
enlarge our intimacy

You who are animus
and blood,
who make me dust

from this table
blown into grass
invisible –

is it you or me
I pass
and cannot see?



Skater

Out into the cold
goes the line you draw
across this pond.

Under deep dark
its track runs true as a dream,

bruised and blue.

Night is its own weather.
A stillness gloves
sheet-ice and sedge,

that cluster of willows above
the darkening rim.
When you move and break the silence

alarm thuds an ice drum
tuned tight as the skin
that binds your bones.

In an elegant
enlarging lens, you
and the moon must drown

together. Go on, then,
where glass
waits to splinter,

and every step's new,
your skates hush-hush
your water-double

through that broken mirror
where moonlight
hurls your shadow forward –

The line behind you brightens
with crystal, then darkens
as you draw it out

of your perfect future, that blank
you recognise
at every turn as you bank

on a widening curve,
and the ice-star at your foot pulses...



Night, dark water

and this is you, slicing
the dream membrane
that holds them apart –

when out into the pond's
cold eye
you go alone.



At Käsmu

The light hardly seems to move.
It clusters at the window
as a frieze of trees
on mineral blue, which might shift –
but this isn't the tentative west,
stippled water-colour
and nuance in light and speech.

Instead, a hooded crow
sways the tip of a pine
so it catches the sun, gold, pink, gold,
and below it the desk gleams
while I drink my coffee and wonder
how to phrase this problem,
this matter of dwelling –

or, more precisely, of not-dwelling.
For what's in question is how to inhabit
(an identity, a place) fully,
which for Heidegger meant without reflection.
Costly blindness...
And seventy years on, at a desk
in a room of grey panelling

and marine light,
on the shore of a country marred
by occupations – Russian, German –
I see we still don't know
how to express the I, solus, the eye
into which all experience flows.
Surely a group has neither sense nor senses?

Or (to try it another way,
as evening cools outside the open window)
why should I finally face
the problem of identity
on this Baltic peninsula,
surrounded by an unknown language
sweet as birdcall?

What's displaced is abjured:
a Freudian rejection, like those Christmas cards
we leave too late to post.
(I'm reminded of a family snap,
the child squinting and camera-shy in her NHS glasses.)
So this fort-da game of Frequent Traveller
is only fancy dress, an incognito.



Driving here, Mart said of the Soviet era,
 “We learnt to be liars”. The dust road tipped away
 and our imagined skid
 sketched a second route through the dusk:
 the way we’re tracked by that second life
 we don’t lead. Like bad conscience –
 dreams of murder, or of choking –

longing for what-might-have-been
 is a tracer of moving light
 behind each act. Is this lying?
 (Here I interrupt myself
 to fiddle with the curtain.)
 Existentially, such a split is bad faith,
 but it’s how we live –

isn’t it? Draw the curtain
 and path, pines and painted villas disappear,
 but they could all be here,
 and my hand on the seam makes that difference...
 Imagined from outside
 when I stroll the lane,
 the room swells as if in a convex lens,

the very model
 of feminine resourcefulness.
 Its wood panels are like pleats –
 all dove-grey serenity.
 When I was a child
 I was in love with my feminine mother.
 She hoisted me up

and let me play with her glass necklace.
 Each facet was a prism
 but behind the colour
 was the volume of glass itself,
 ugly-pretty. It seemed a trick I couldn’t grasp.
 When we had to be fairies I refused.
 I wanted proper lessons.

Only colouring was allowed, so I coloured the table
 in my fury to be.
 Not to be-a-girl –
 behind the school incinerator
 I pulled the pink ribbons out of my hair.
 Now, walking down to the beach
 beyond the trees, I’m still practicing,

neither Alpha-femme nor dyke



but as it were entre-deux-guerres.
 The body writes white, say the Frenchwomen. Well –
 or smudges like a moving hand,
 so what's ink, and what white paper,
 gets dimly diffuse
 like this evening light and shade.

I'm a visitor here.
 So are these eight – nine – wild swans
 gliding out of the shining water
 towards the jetty.
 Look how each bird's double,
 reflected beneath it,
 completes the fraction:

a silvered surface
 and, underneath, weeds pale as milk;
 metaphor perhaps for how,
 though I dream of something fixed,
 history completes me too,
 and I dwell on water,
 that endlessly-adapting ground

whose instinct is motion.
 The human earth floats on it
 like the saucer in myth.
 ...After a pause, I change "motion" to "revision".
 People who have minds can change them,
 my father used to say.
 I love whatever changes.



A Private Language

Nose to the fire,
the dog lies diagonally
on my geometric red and gold
Moroccan rug,
drawing “rest and quietness”
into the room.
The ash logs seethe,

and her breathing
seems to be rocking
a small ark –
I imagine an engine
glowing and thudding
between her ribs.
She sighs

and thumps her tail,
signifying some pleasure
of which I might be part.
Privacy’s a kind of blindness –
I sink down
and then down. Or maybe
I haven’t moved at all,

it’s hard to tell.
What’s to measure by?
...Shutting my eyes
in school assembly,
I used to wonder
whether I was really upright
or tilting absurdly...

Eight days and not a soul.
The wind
soughs in the chimney.
If I shut my eyes
I begin to float.
Sometimes the dog wakes,
scratches, or paces...

Something must make me believe
I have sensation
in this odd wool-muffled object
I call “my” arm,
but not in the blue-and-cream chintz
chair-arm it rests on – ?
Sometimes I feel I could guess



what it is to be the dog
in her wise boredom –
even to burn like this small
domestic fire.

Stupid, of course,
but tonight every light's
on its own –

though if you passed close enough
you'd hear each one
rapt in monody –
Life is beautiful
the log shifting
in the stove whispers
to me, and to the dreaming dog.



The Code

We have discovered the secret of life.
- Francis Crick

How each thing gathers to a whole,
the leaven in its heart
holding a pattern before it shows
capacity –

the tree inside the feathered stamen,
the egg inside the bird,
are infolded, not unthought –
like something heard.

As if intention stored itself
in the unspeaking world,
or creation longed to speak
one secret word –

Who failed to crack the egg?
I-I-I cries the lark.
Who missed the mystery of birth?
The nodding larch.

Alone in our unceasing day
we press against the curve
that presence makes of land – and sky –
and hear the beat

of what can never come to term
but stopless grows:
the public secret of a code
the whole world knows.



Envoi

What we hope for
is a time to come

when we'll look back on these afternoons
coined with leaf-shadow and rain

as if to a beautiful exception,
that clarity

in gaze or touch –
the sudden rightness of a room,

blood-clot cherries in a blue bowl
and hogweed frothing at the window –

Realizing then
what it meant to live this way,

finding perfume from things we dream of
in the grain of a table,

the dust that shifts on the summer sill.



Endgame

The blind-cords
hang looped
in air –
like a gesture
awaiting completion

or a story
where colour drains
from the walls
as your hand closes
on the rope.

In the garden
a blackbird whickers
across the lawn...
These still
interiors

where everything
bears witness –
dust on chintz,
magazines, the riff
of light in china –

are like chantries.
Their lights go on
among the shrubs,
to the edge
of the world.



Rough Music

Songs without Tunes

Eurydice –

The river tightens
its tourniquet
Water music

Held tight,
fear turns an
old tune –

Hurdy-gurdy heart,
lead me
down-river

Orpheus –

Summer evenings at the weir:
her body in green water
or warm on the bank beside me
as we shared a beer...

Eurydice –

I'm the lost girl,
a trace on the tape,
in the lens

That half-articulate blur
glimpsed in the blink
of your eye

Orpheus –

How could she just disappear?
I thought we'd live together –
but she's gone
Atoms in air
her red scarf, her shining hair
Hades –

I brought her home –



I bring them all home –

the bruised, the crushed,
defaced, deflowered

Fruits of love
from the black river

Orpheus –

Hold her in your arms
 she slips away through the dark
Hold her with a ring
 she slips through like a magician's scarf
Hold her with a knife
 she slips away
 she slips away

Hades –

Consider the evidence
 Just-married,
a girl goes looking for danger –
which suggests ambivalence

And the boy won't let it go –
 No –
he threatens to kill himself
Not what you'd call a hero

Eurydice –

Love is an eclipse
I wanted to step into the light –
that vast silence

free of fists and hearts and rose tattoos,
flotsam and jetsam
of his need

Every girl wants to be free
When the snake bit
I offered my arm

After the fix I put on my ring,
I rolled down my sleeve
to cover the scar



Hades –

Death

chill on the stairs

Death

the way your dealer looks at you

Death

a car stopping too close

Death

shouts in an empty street

Orpheus –

I wanted her light

she brought it with her

I wanted her skin

she dressed me in it

I wanted her breath

she held it for me

I wanted her smell her nostrils her secret music

she took them away

Hades –

When the boy came looking

I should have shut the door,

you could see he was trouble,

a smack-head guitar dreamer

They had one final row –

tears, screaming – Then I lost it

What happens

when anger opens the sluice?

Eurydice –

It wasn't love, the second time

I disappeared

The water shone black and white

like a choice

I swam upriver to my heart

looking for harbour

till Death took me at last,

like a lover



Letter to —

Midnight in my small
serious cell:
its walls are pink and recently-plastered,
its high ceiling suggests prayer.
Close by, a fan yaws on, and on.
It yaws when I switch the light off,
the heater off —

but I mind, and don't mind.
The cloister's going on with its business
and I'm in its comfortable,
well-appointed belly
like a princeling in a womb
crammed with furniture —
a literal Gothic dream!

Suppose I stayed here,
tucked up,
till a sort of gestation
worked itself out — ?
...But morning sets the kitchen flue
roaring from the roof opposite
and grayish light

puddling the lino —
also, I feel sick
after last night's reheated fish supper.
It's hard to stop the self
leaking away
into these distractions,
every bit as irresistible as usual,

but, "Recollect yourself",
Montaigne, or my mother, might say —
so I do —
in the quirky limestone light.
It's so like rumour or an aroma,
so comfortingly human,
that all I can do is be human...

Downstairs,
lavender bushes
cluster like grey mops
and our young cook's smoking
at the kitchen door — thoughtfully.
When he finishes he adjusts his cap,



an unhurried gesture,

everything in good time
(except fish).

First you have to know something,
the gesture suggests,
then you can love it.
Instance: My scrabble
of tourist thoughts.

After a pause (really a nap) –
then all at once –
I discover everything's digested.
Not just poisson à la Carcassonne,
but my cell too –
its tall window, its baby-turquoise
shutters with a lift-and-turn

nineteenth-century ratchet
from whose daisy
I've strung salami, and plum tomatoes...
We are what we love.
Strong flavours, and light,
and the way a shadow shows itself
on the pink wall –

so intimate –
make a life I could choose.
And though you already know this much,
I'm writing, from a town
you've never visited,
to thank you for something –
it might be patience –

that's as real
as these sunny trophies.
Here in the Midi,
light loves the limestone so much
it seem to collect not on
but in it;
the pale carious stone

steals fire.
Do you see what I mean –
and what's behind these
stones and tiles
rimmed with street-noise,
these shutters
and the crackling bread?

